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Developments in Indochina

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Developments in Indochina

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In interviews with French journalists in Peking, Sihanouk is increasingly dour about his future political role, particularly because of his inability to move the Communists toward negotiations. His morale should receive a boost this week when his mother, Queen Kossamak, and a large entourage including several of his offspring arrive in Peking. On the military front, the Khmer Communists are keeping up the pressure against Route 5.

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SOUTH VIETNAM 7

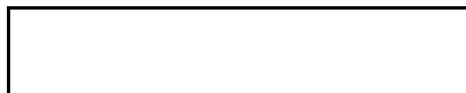
Saigon's efforts to retake a ranger camp in Western Pleiku Province received a serious setback last week; a 7,000-man force remains stalled a few miles south and west of Pleiku City. President Thieu has shaken up his key military command throughout South Vietnam. On the domestic front, An Quang Buddhist leaders are maneuvering for position prior to a December meeting when the religious leaders of the movement will be elected.

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Sihanouk Sulks

Sihanouk is taking an increasingly gloomy line about his future political prospects. In interviews with French journalists in Peking last week, the Prince implied that his relations with the Khmer Communist leaders--which ostensibly had been harmonious since his trip to Cambodia last March--have soured again. Sihanouk repeated that he could not return to Cambodia because of his differences with the Communists, whom he called "Stalinists." He also admitted that while his "united front" with the Communists is necessary for world opinion, it does not in fact exist.

Sihanouk repeated his earlier statement that all of the cabinet posts in his Peking-based "government" would soon be turned over to the leaders of the insurgency in Cambodia. He asserted that the initiative had been his and implied that the Communists have not yet agreed. He also made it clear that the cabinet proposal was designed to smoke out the insurgents regarding his own future as the ostensible head of the "government." Although Sihanouk did not state it explicitly, it is also possible that his offer to turn over the posts was to demonstrate to the insurgents that they had nothing to fear from negotiations.

Sihanouk's inability to move the Communists toward negotiations seems central to his pessimism about his own future political usefulness. Implying that he was willing to accept a compromise that returned him to power in Cambodia, Sihanouk stated that the Communists were "highly unlikely" to join a coalition government in Phnom Penh. In addition, he indicated that the Khmer Communists continue to believe that a military solution is possible in Cambodia. Sihanouk, for his

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part, claims that for their own reasons, neither Peking nor Hanoi is willing to give the insurgents the necessary logistic support, and he stated flatly that an attack against Phnom Penh would fail. [REDACTED]

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Exit the Queen

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Sihanouk's morale should be boosted by the arrival in China this week of his mother, Queen Kossamak. [REDACTED]

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The government's attitude toward members of the royal family has softened considerably since last March, when Lon Nol put almost all of them under house arrest because he was persuaded that a "royalist plot" lay behind the bombing attack on his residence by a disaffected Cambodian Air Force pilot. The house arrests subsequently were lifted, and some members of Sihanouk's family were allowed to travel abroad. In addition, the government has freed a number of political prisoners who were jailed at the time of Sihanouk's ouster. The most prominent of these is Colonel Oum Manorine, Sihanouk's brother-in-law.

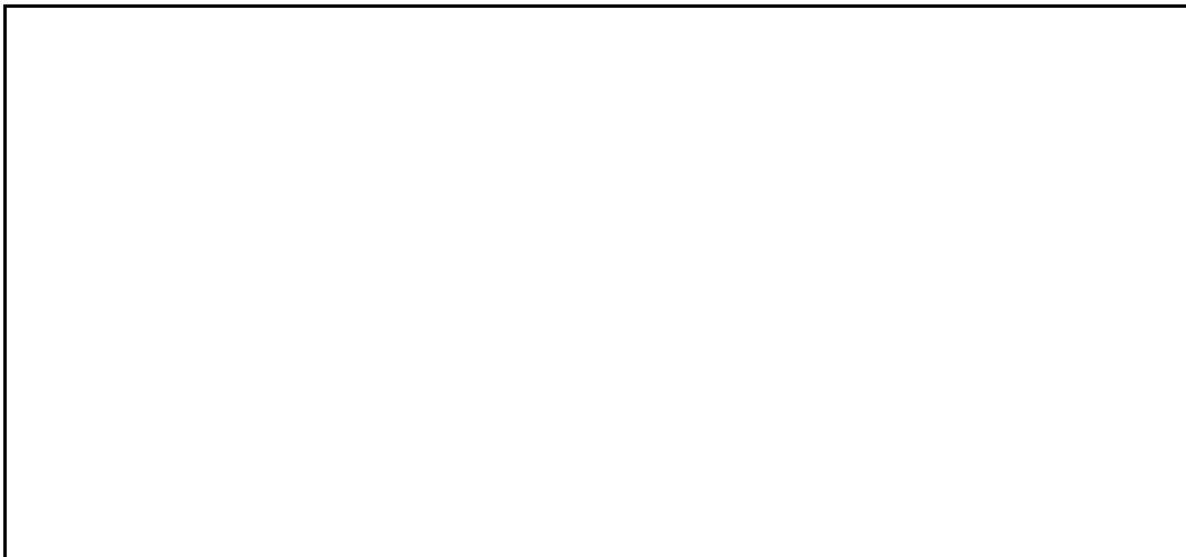
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The Military Situation

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The Khmer Communists are keeping up the pressure against Route 5. Over the weekend insurgent troops gained control over two additional short sections of the highway about nine and 14 miles northwest of Phnom Penh. By 30 October, however, government troops backed by artillery had managed to drive the Communists away from the interdiction point closest to the capital. The insurgents rounded up all the civilians in the contested area and took them along when they withdrew.

Other government forces from the town of Oudong have made only limited progress in trying to dislodge the Communists from their other positions along Route 5 between Oudong and Phnom Penh. North of Oudong, the insurgents still hold an eight-mile stretch of the highway between Tuk Laak and Sala Lek Pram. Government activities in this sector are still confined to clearing operations around the latter town, and the Cambodian Army high command does not plan to try to reopen Route 5 up to Tuk Laak until early next year.

Elsewhere in the north, the insurgents continue to carry out intermittent shelling of government

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positions around Kompong Cham. Government clearing operations around the city have now been completed, and no others are scheduled for the time being.

South of Phnom Penh, units from the army's 1st Division are still making scant headway in their efforts to regain ground along the capital's southern defense line near the junction of Routes 2 and 201. Several miles to the west, the insurgents have pinned down a government battalion operating just below the Prek Thnaot River. Ten miles east of the capital, a relief force on 29 October finally managed to link up with the besieged government garrison at Vihear Suor. Casualties are being evacuated, and supplies and fresh troops are being moved into the small market town.

In the southwest, Route 4 has been reopened, and truck convoys are moving again between Phnom Penh and Kompong Som. Another Mekong convoy arrived safely in Phnom Penh on 27 October carrying rice, munitions, and POL supplies.

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~~SECRET~~SOUTH VIETNAMGovernment Dilemma in Western Pleiku [REDACTED] 25X1

The plans of Major General Toan, South Vietnamese Commander of Military Region 2, to retake Plei Djerang Ranger camp received a serious setback last week. A battalion-sized government force was attacked by elements of the North Vietnamese 320th Division, employing heavy artillery and T-54 tanks, and was routed from its position 12 miles west of Pleiku City, with heavy losses. Toan's 7,000-man force, charged with drawing the Communists into contact where government airpower and tanks could be effectively employed, remains stalled a few miles south and west of Pleiku City.

Although Toan has recalled the 42nd Regiment from Binh Dinh Province to Pleiku to assist the government forces, the future of the operation is uncertain. [REDACTED] 25X1

[REDACTED] Plei Djerang is now occupied by a 500-man force of Montagnard separatists organized by the North Vietnamese. [REDACTED] the 320th Division units that captured Plei Djerang are currently directed against the government Ranger headquarters at Plei Blang, some five miles west of Pleiku City, well behind the government's forward elements. If this information is accurate, an attempt to press on with plans to retake the camp at this point could increase a threat to Plei Blang and also risk trouble from the Montagnard minority in the area. [REDACTED] 25X1

Thieu Shakes Up Military Commands [REDACTED] 25X1

Following the recent cabinet changes, President Thieu has initiated a shake-up of key military personnel throughout South Vietnam. Leading the list is the commander of Military Region 3, Lieutenant General

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Nguyen Van Minh, whose lackluster performance has come under increasing criticism in the face of a predicted upsurge in Communist activity north of Saigon. Minh's replacement is Lieutenant General Pham Quoc Thuan, formerly assigned to the two-party Joint Military Commission and commandant of the Thu Duc Infantry School. Minh will become commandant of the school, and Brigadier General Phan Hoa Hiep will succeed Thuan on the Joint Military Commission. [REDACTED]

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through these moves President Thieu intends to downgrade the importance of the commission, as well as strengthen the command in Military Region 3.

Several South Vietnamese divisions may also undergo a shake-up. The commander of the 1st Infantry Division in Military Region 1, Brigadier General Than, will become deputy commander of the national military academy in Dalat. He will be replaced at the 1st Division by his deputy, Colonel Diem. The commanders of the 5th and 25th divisions in Military Region 3 could also be relieved because of inadequate performance. General Du Quoc Dong, a former commander of the Airborne Division, will become head of the Noncommissioned Officers Academy, while the former commandant, General Canh, will assume responsibility for the People's Self-Defense Forces. Reports are circulating in Saigon that Thieu will make other changes in an effort to strengthen his military command. [REDACTED]

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Buddhist Factional Problems

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Rival An Quang Buddhist leaders are maneuvering for position prior to a meeting scheduled for December at which religious leaders of the An Quang movement will be elected. Personality clashes appear to be at the heart of the disputes among the Buddhists, but differences over political strategy also are an important factor. Friction has been intensified since

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the January cease-fire agreement, as the Buddhists have come under pressure from both the Communists and the Thieu government. Many of the most influential An Quang leaders apparently favor maintaining the present low political profile of the movement, but in recent months, the more activist-inclined Buddhists have become increasingly restive over President Thieu's moves to strengthen his political position.

The main battle shaping up for the December meeting is over the position of Thich Thien Minh, who has been serving as acting rector of An Quang's Secular Affairs Institute. Thien Minh hopes to be elected permanent rector, but he faces substantial opposition, apparently including that of Thich Tri Quang, who has been An Quang's most influential leader. Some oppose Thien Minh because he and his followers have worked for better relations between the An Quang movement and the government and for reunification with the small pro-government Quoc Tu faction. Thien Minh may now be shifting his ground somewhat.

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A Buddhist legislative group may also be preparing new political initiatives. The legislators, led by outspoken government critic Senator Vu Van Mau, has broadened its base by adding a number of lay Buddhist "advisers." In a public ceremony earlier this month, Mau and his followers indicated that they intended to work for peace. The legislators may be seeking some new outlet for their political energies now that the government dominates the National Assembly, but it is not clear whether they intend to challenge Thieu actively. The group apparently has the support of Tri Quang, who attended the ceremony, but Thien Minh reportedly hopes to curb its influence.

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There is also a more radical element within the An Quang movement that reportedly hopes to initiate a protest campaign against the government. These Buddhists have been in contact with the recently released radical feminist Madame Ngo Ba Thanh in hopes she will revive her protest group. The radicals could gain some popular support if they seize on the government's current economic difficulties, but it seems unlikely that many of the most important Buddhist leaders would back their efforts.

Tri Quang's own position within the An Quang movement may be made clearer at the leadership gathering in December. For many years he has been the most prominent Buddhist, and his position has been unchallenged during much of the period. The increased factional divisions in recent months undoubtedly threaten Tri Quang, but he may be able to maintain his authority over most of the An Quang movement. If he successfully protects his position, An Quang is not likely to abandon the relatively moderate nature of its opposition, although Tri Quang's support for the expanded legislative group suggests that the Buddhists could become more active in the political arena.

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